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RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHRB #0784/01 120124Z  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 301242Z APR 07  
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6445  
INFO RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2993  
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3295  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 4623  
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 3482

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000784

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SENSITIVE  
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DEPT FOR NEA/MAG AND EB/TRA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELTN](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCAN ROAD REFORM LOST IN RHETORIC

REF: A. RABAT 00492

[1](#)B. CASABLANCA 00071

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The appalling death toll on Moroccan roads is being overshadowed by uninformed and politically inspired rhetoric against the proposed new road reform law under debate in Parliament, according to the law's principal champion, Transport Minister Karim Ghellab. Moroccan roads are recognized as among the most dangerous in the world, registering on average 12 deaths and 110 injuries per day. In a meeting with econoff on April 26, Transport Ministry spokesperson, Khadija Bourara, said the government had launched a renewed information campaign in hopes of shifting public perceptions in favor of the legislation, but admitted there was little chance for passage before the September parliamentary elections. End Summary.

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Need for Reform Clear in Grim Statistics  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Deadly road accidents have become routine in Morocco, as evidenced by the weekly tallies compiled by the Moroccan government.

During a meeting with econoff on April 26, Ministry of Transport Communications Advisor, Khadija Bourara, related that the new road reform law, which inspired two major labor strikes within the past month (reftels), was initiated in 2003 as a result of continued deterioration in road safety. Bourara explained that faced with a mortality trend that would reach 5,000 annual deaths by 2012, Morocco launched an inter-ministerial national strategic plan that focused on infrastructure, legislative, and regulatory change. She emphasized the new road reform law was only one aspect of the government's plan to improve road safety (Plan Strategique Integre d'Urgence, PSIU), which also included a public awareness campaign and an overhaul in the licensing and registration of both vehicles and drivers.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Bourara emphasized that the proposed legislation came under the government's primary responsibility to protect the health and safety of its citizens. She said the law would increase the rights of users by establishing due process for the adjudication of violations, introduced a point system for driving offenses, and would end the current practice of lifetime licenses. Bourara admitted the law contained controversial measures, primarily the perceived increase in fines and penalties. She explained the law split simple traffic violations into three categories of fines (400, 750, and 1500 dirhams), while it established elevated penalties that would be decided by a magistrate for more serious violations, such as driving under the influence.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Results to date of the PSIU have been mixed. Impressive

improvements in the Moroccan highway system have been made and Morocco is in the process of expanding its highway system from 500 km to 1,500 km in a national program valued at USD 2.5 billion. Under the expansion, auto-routes will connect Tangier to the Moroccan Mediterranean coast, Fez to Oujda on the Algerian border, and Marrakech to Agadir in the south. Most significant, the new multi-lane auto-route connecting Marrakech to Casablanca opened in April, offering a new safer alternative to one of the most notorious and dangerous stretches of road in North Africa. Nevertheless, while mortality and accident rates showed a steady decrease in 2004 and 2005, this trend reversed beginning in the summer of 2006. 2006 was the worst year since 2003, with 3,622 deaths and 12,024 serious injuries in 56,426 accidents. According to Bourara, cyclists and pedestrians account for 50 percent of Moroccan road fatalities.

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Cost of Corruption Stirs Controversy  
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15. (SBU) Legislative progress has been more elusive. Morocco has been shaken by two national transportation strikes, as chauffeurs, taxi drivers, and truckers joined forces to protest the new law. Headed by the Union of Professional Federations (SUFP) and the Committee of Moroccan Workers (COM), the actions were launched to protest the law's stiffer penalties and its provisions allowing the confiscation of licenses. Union officials criticized the government for not discussing the proposed legislation with the unions and argued that the new law set fines at levels that were inappropriate for the standard of living in Morocco. They also challenged the consequences of granting traffic police the authority to confiscate licenses, arguing instead that such power would give traffic police (seen as one of the most corrupt entities in the country) more leverage to extort bribes from drivers who were at risk of losing their licenses, and consequently their jobs and livelihoods.

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16. (SBU) At issue for many Moroccans is the "actual" price Moroccans will have to pay for traffic violations under the new law. Currently, the average fine is 400 dirhams or USD 47 for most minor violations such as speeding. In practice, many Moroccans report that they only make a 50-100 dirham immediate payment to the officer at the scene. In explaining the public's criticism of the new law's increased fines, one Moroccan asked, "If a 400 dirham offense actually costs 100 dirhams, how much will a 1500 dirham offense cost?"

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"Man Bites Dog"  
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17. (SBU) When asked about the controversy surrounding the new law, Bourara said it was a case of "Man Bites Dog." She said that the press paid hardly any attention to the law when it was first announced by the government and failed to convey the law's objectives and provisions. She quipped that there is not an interesting story when a dog bites a man, which was how the press treated the government's information campaign. However, she said, all that changed when the strikes occurred, with the press inflaming the uninformed and emotional outrage against the bill. "The story changed to 'Man Bites Dog.'" She admitted that the strikes and public outcry against the law had put the government on the defensive.

18. (SBU) In the end, intensive negotiations, intervention by the Prime Minister, and some government concessions enabled the government to weather the two strikes. Since that date, Transport Minister Ghellab, whose personal fate appears linked to that of the bill, launched a public relations campaign, challenging critics to read the government proposal. Ghellab said he was stunned to learn how uninformed many of the strikers were and described much of the rhetoric as emotional. During his multiple public appearances, he also reemphasized the law's justification and defended some of its most controversial provisions, primarily the perceived increase in sanctions.

¶9. (SBU) Bourara repeated Minister Ghellab's points while expressing frustration at the public's hypocritical stance on the corruption issue. "Everyone cries that the system is corrupt, yet it is their own fault." She said the new law was the government's attempt to police the police and emphasized that the government was committed to swift action when corrupt officials were identified. However, she added, it was a two-way street, and that the public had to take responsibility for its culpability by ending the practice of offering bribes when stopped.

¶10. (SBU) Bourara said the proposed law was a significant positive step against corruption because it would give citizens a process to challenge unwarranted violations. Currently, she explained, there is no choice. When someone is given a violation they can either pay it in total, or offer partial payment through a bribe. Under the new law, however, Bourara said someone falsely stopped or charged will have the opportunity, through due process, to challenge the allegation. According to Bourara, the new law gives drivers increased rights and the means to expose corrupt officials.

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Fed-Up With It All  
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¶11. (SBU) Bourara, clearly fatigued and stressed from the past month, said professional transporters must accept much of the blame for Morocco's dismal safety record, and emphasized that the whole system of licensing professional drivers had to be reformed. She said professional taxi, bus, and truck drivers make-up less than 10 percent of the drivers in Morocco but account for 33 percent of the deadly accidents. She added that the government planned to install a new system of granting professional licenses that would include periodic physicals and recurring training. She compared the goal of the reform to the licensing of airline pilots. "It would be absurd to issue lifetime pilot licenses to people who have not received any pilot training... Yet that is exactly what we do for professional drivers in Morocco."

¶12. (SBU) Bourara lamented that the transportation syndicates were against the reform measures and admitted they had been successful in stirring-up opposition. She questioned their logic by emphasizing the cost of the current situation. "250 of the 3,500 productive citizens killed each year are professional drivers. These are shattered families who will have to be supported by the state; yet, still they resist."

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¶13. (SBU) When asked about the current state of the legislation in Parliament, Bourara threw-up her hands and said, "Who knows?" She sarcastically added, "We should congratulate them, they have halted this injustice and nobody cares that 3,500 more will be killed." She finished by saying she doubted the bill would move through Parliament before the elections, sighing it was just too controversial.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: For the second time in four months, Transport Minister Ghellab has emerged as the government's point person, charged with pushing through a comprehensive reform bill in the face of stiff union resistance. However, unlike the earlier port reform bill he pushed through in December 2006 against the protests of the stevedores, the road bill faces both union and public resistance. While Ghellab appears to have again diffused immediate labor unrest by brokering private deals with transportation unions, the public's perception of the law remains a hot potato, and the government does not appear eager to spend the political capital required to push it through before the elections.

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